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The personalisation of conflict reporting: Visual coverage of the Ukraine crisis on Twitter

This study explores the question of the blurring of traditional boundaries between the personal and the professional in relation to images tweeted during the Ukraine conflict. The study focuses on two Moscow-based correspondents, Shaun Walker and Alec Luhn, and a photojournalist, Paul Hansen, all of whom created parallel conflict narratives on Twitter while reporting on the Ukraine conflict for legacy newspapers. Their use of Twitter is examined here in the context of "personalised reporting" that allows for more opinion and displays of emotion than are typically acceptable in traditional news reporting. The results demonstrate the coexistence of the traditional media's visualisation of conflict with that driven by social media logic.

Keywords: Twitter, visual narrative, journalism, conflict reporting, personalisation, Ukraine crisis

Introduction

Twitter has transformed itself from a text-based service to a visual media that allows embedded images and multi-photo displays. Although Twitter condenses textual expressions, affiliated visual representations allow for heightened expressivity, engagement and "sharability" (Chen et al. 2013; Hjorth and Burgess 2014). In journalism studies, a rich body of research has emerged that examines how news organisations and individual journalists use Twitter for various purposes, such as reporting news and creating personal brands (Hermida 2012; Canter 2014). One unexamined research area concerns the kind of images journalists publish and share when they tweet while reporting on a conflict. This question is pertinent to understanding how the social media environment shapes the visual narrative of conflicts.

Previous research has stressed that the evolving practices of online social media platforms collapse the boundaries between professional and personal expressions to enhance visibility and affect (Papacharissi 2012). The underlying rationale motivating the present study is that journalistic practices on Twitter are less rigid and may present a more personal or emotional form of narrative (Hermida 2010; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012). In legacy news organisations, editors select photographs to illustrate a news story, applying varying professional standards and news values. On Twitter, governed by what Djick and Poell (2013) define as "social media logic", individual journalists are able to select, interpret and frame images, thus potentially applying values that differ from the professional norm.

This study explores the question of the blurring of traditional boundaries between the personal and the professional in relation to visual narratives tweeted during the Ukraine conflict. The study focuses on two Moscow-based correspondents, Shaun Walker and Alec Luhn, and a photojournalist, Paul Hansen, all of whom reported on the Ukraine conflict for legacy newspapers while also creating parallel conflict narratives on Twitter. The article examines the kinds of images that journalists publish on Twitter and assesses whether the platform allows for a more emotional, personal and political voice, as well as imagery that is not typically seen in legacy media.

The Ukraine conflict and the war of images

> Obnoxious shouty Ukrainians and abusive shouty Russians. Twitter mentions so depressing, the time when they were informative/useful long gone. (Walker, 5 Aug 2014)

The Ukraine conflict refers to the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine as well as to the diplomatic wars between Ukraine and Russia and between Russia and the West. The conflict has been characterised by a discursive battle or "information war" that is seen in the drastically different narratives about the nature of the conflict: a civil war between the central government and separatist insurgents; a conflict between Ukraine and Russia caused by Russia's economic and political interests; or a proxy war between Russia and the West through which Russia has reacted to the expansion of both the European Union (EU) and NATO (Ojala and Pantti 2017). The above post on Twitter by Shaun Walker expressing frustration, illustrates the politicised, polarised and biased Twitter environment in the context of the information warfare within which reporters become inescapably entangled. Journalists covering highly charged international conflicts face intense scrutiny by their audiences (Tumber and Prentoulis 2005, 221; Higgins and Smith 2011), which has reached new heights in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict because of the use of state-affiliated trolls and the manufacture of disinformation as tools for manipulating online discussions for political goals (Tanchak 2017).

The Ukraine conflict also illustrates how visual images can become a source of discursive conflict regarding events, forming a key part of the manufactured news (Khaldarova and Pantti 2015). The struggle to control the conflict narrative is fought on social media sites, characterised by visual, viral content and the coupling of the personal with the political. At the core of the relationship between the digital media environment and the changing nature of conflicts and wars (e.g. Cottle 2008; Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010; Matheson and Allan 2009; Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2014) is the breakdown of editorial structures and control over information and visual images, producing an array of competing discourses. While the relationship between images and conflict has become more complex in the digital media environment, visual representations remain crucial in shaping public perceptions of the causes and consequences of conflict events (Cottle 2006; Roger 2013). Images fulfil significant, intertwined roles as pieces of evidence, as affective hooks to engage audiences, as vehicles for promoting particular interpretations of the issues and actors involved, and as political weapons for gaining public support. Twitter and other social media sites are now seen as integral to the way information and images about conflicts and crisis events circulate and are reframed and reacted to, contributing to the affective force of the images (Papacharissi 2012).

Furthermore, the new actors involved in visual reporting in the digital era, particularly citizens who take photographs and videos, have been the focus of recent research on the immediate and often emotion-laden visual content coming from conflict zones (e.g. Allan 2013; Mortensen 2015). In

addition to the use of non-routine sources, the development of digital technology has led to other fundamental shifts in visual story-telling in legacy news media, including image-sharing on social media platforms. Another factor affecting the use of images in conflict reporting is the merging of journalistic roles. For example, print journalists now frequently select images or take both photos and videos and embed them in their tweets.

A key question is this: how does the loosening of the institutional media's monopoly on conflict imagery shape visual narratives of conflict and war? Are we witnessing a diversification of news perspectives and new repertoires of imagery through which scenes of violence and suffering are becoming more accessible? Andrew Hoskins (2013) argues that there are persistent expectations about the visualisation of war in the mainstream news which result in the repetition of familiar topics, frames and iconographic rhetoric. Such templates are, he writes, "routinely employed as sometimes near-instantaneous prisms through which current and unfolding events are described, presented and contextualized" (Hoskins 2013, 240). A recent study on the visual framing of the Ukraine conflict in European newspapers revealed a dominant framing pattern that was closely aligned with the EU's position and policies concerning the conflict; this pattern ultimately contributed to reducing the conflict to a clash between the East and the West (Ojala and Pantti 2017).

Getting more personal on Twitter

Social media are not merely new journalistic "tools" to disseminate and gather information; they shape the style and practices of journalism (Hermida 2013; Poell and Dijck 2013). On Twitter, the production, selection and distribution of content is governed by social media logic (Djick and Poell 2013), which encourages subjective voices and personal expression in order to generate emotional engagement. According to Bruns (2012), the visibility of individual journalists on Twitter is similarly dependent on how and to what extent a journalist presents his or her personal face rather than an institutional brand. Thus, there is an expectation of "personalised reporting" on Twitter that allows for more personal opinions and displays of emotion than is typically acceptable in traditional news reporting.

Consequently, Twitter's impact on the content journalists produce, particularly regarding the boundary between objective and subjective journalism, has been a key concern in journalism studies. There is a rich body of research on the interplay between established norms and practices in journalism, and practices enabled by the platform that deviate from established conventions (Hermida 2013). Research has looked at how journalists' use of Twitter crosses the traditional journalistic line between remaining a neutral information-provider and expressing personal value judgements and emotions (e.g. Canter 2015; Cozma and Chen 2013; Hedman 2016; Hermida 2010; Lasorsa 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012), showing that journalists tend to employ more opinionated and emotional reporting styles in tweets than in traditional reporting formats. However, there is also evidence of the differences that develop in different national contexts, between major and minor news outlets, between print and broadcast journalists and among groups of journalists (see Canter 2015; Cozma and Chen 2013; Lawrence et al. 2014; Rogstad 2014). For instance, previous studies have indicated that a journalist's tweeting style is related to their level of activity on Twitter in that journalists who are enthusiastic Twitter users are more likely to challenge professional neutrality and distance (Hedman 2015; Holton and Lewis 2011).

The line between objective and subjective news practices has traditionally been particularly problematic for conflict reporting. There is a long-standing debate about whether conflict reporters should offer objectivity or advocacy, namely take a moral stance, raise awareness about the consequences of war and create sympathy for victims (Allan and Zelizer 2004; Tumber and

Prentoulis 2003). In war photography, the dominant idea of photography as providing indexical evidence of events serves to repress the fact that news images come loaded with subjective interpretations and ideological frames (Zelizer 2010, 23). At this juncture, we must also consider the changing propaganda environment as a significant part of the modern battlefield, shaping what is depicted. This battlefield, as Hoskins (2013, 242) states, "is not representable in the same way as traditional warfare".

While subjective voices and the disclosure of personal experiences are nothing new in journalistic story-telling, the digital media environment has opened up more space for personalised and emotional forms of journalistic discourse, including visual formats. Expressing emotions and opinions has traditionally been considered a deviation from the journalistic norm or the value of objectivity; therefore, journalists have sought to hide their emotional responses to tragic events, for instance by using visual images as powerful devices for eliciting emotions, or using emotion-conveying exemplars (Pantti 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). On Twitter, the retweet has been identified as having a comparable distancing or accountability-shunning function, helping journalists to express humour and judgment while retaining a façade of objectivity (Holton and Lewis 2011; Molyneux 2014; Mourão, Diehl and Vasudevan 2016).

Beyond the increased tendency to express personal opinions, the collapse of the boundary between the private and the public also involves the sharing of personal life details. In the literature, personalised ways of tweeting are linked to either audience engagement or to bonding with fellow journalists (Holton and Lewis 2011; Lasorsa 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012; Molyneux 2015; Mourão 2015; Ojala, Pantti and Kangas 2016; Siapera and Iliadi 2015). On the other hand, a journalist sharing his or her inner thoughts and feelings may also be focusing on self-branding (Bruns 2012; Hanusch and Bruns 2016; Holton and Lewis 2011; Holton and Molyneux 2015; Molyneux 2015). Visual images continue to play a central role in constructing contemporary conflicts and wars, but so far, scholars have not paid attention to how professional journalists' visual narratives on Twitter make conflicts visible and intelligible.

The study

This study focused on two foreign correspondents and a war photographer who actively tweeted on the Ukraine conflict both on the ground and from outside the conflict zone. Alec Luhn is an American freelance journalist based in Moscow who has written for *the Guardian*, *the New York Times*, *VICE News* and *the Moscow Times*, among others. Shaun Walker is British and is the Moscow correspondent for *the Guardian*. Paul Hansen is Swedish and is an internationally recognised staff photographer who covers wars and conflicts for *Dagens Nyheter*. This article is part of a larger project examining the visual coverage of the Ukraine conflict in European quality newspapers (*the Guardian*, *Die Welt*, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Helsingin Sanomat*) (Ojala, Pantti and Kangas 2017). The journalists for the study were selected from these newspapers based on their Twitter activity and on their differing journalistic background.

The Twitter data were gathered from 1 July to 31 August 2014. The biggest media event during this period was the shooting down of the international passenger plane MH17 on 17 July 2014 in rebel-held territory in Donetsk. At the end of July, the fighting between pro-Russian insurgents and Ukraine government forces in and near the city of Horlivka claimed several civilian casualties, and the EU and the US announced new sanctions against Russia on 31 July. In August, the event that captured the most media attention was a Russian convoy purportedly delivering humanitarian aid to the government-besieged city of Luhansk, but doing so without the Ukrainian government's permission. At the end of August, Russian soldiers and military vehicles were reported to be engaged in military operations in Eastern Ukraine, where the civil war in the Donetsk and Luhansk

regions had intensified. On 26 August 2014, Vladimir Putin, Petro Poroshenko and EU leaders held a meeting in Minsk, Belarus to resolve the conflict.

All of the tweets that the three journalists posted during this period were collected using the Snap Bird service. The number of tweets in the three accounts totalled 2,345: those tweets that were both related to the Ukrainian conflict and contained a visual image, such as a photograph, cartoon or screenshot, were singled out. Both original tweets and retweets were included in the data as well as those tweets that had links to visual images if the textual post explicitly referred to the existence or nature of the image. The number of image tweets totalled 208: Luhn sent 66, Hansen 32 and Walker 110. Some photos occurred more than once in the data because two journalists (re)tweeted the same photo.

Image-text pairs were selected as the unit of analysis because both modes of communication contribute to the overall meaning and emotional appeal of a tweet: both text and images carry ideological, normative and emotional messages, and one mode can reinforce or undercut the message conveyed by the other (Berger 1982, 128). The image-text pairs were coded by the researcher and an external coder in order to reach satisfactory inter-coder reliability. First, the type of tweet (original or retweet), the source of the image and the number of likes and retweets were coded for each tweet. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify the key themes – armed conflict, international politics, information warfare, the violence of conflict, everyday life and journalistic work – and the primary emotional-moral domains of expression – neutral, tragic, critical, ironic and comical – of the image tweets. Both "ironic" and "comical" image tweets are intended to be funny, but while "ironic" tweets deliver a more or less explicit negative evaluation, "comical" tweets convey a sense of "innocent" playfulness. Moreover, while the function of both "ironic" and "critical" tweets is to deliver a value judgment or a moral statement, those coded as "critical" do not use humour as a rhetorical device, but are solemn or indignant instead.

What is common to all three journalists' image tweets is that the pictures they published or shared originated from news organisations or other journalists: 60 per cent of the images in which the source is clearly identified come from the news media, while pictures originating from the internet and social media sites account for about 10 per cent. The low number of images from social media sources is not surprising because journalists prefer pictures that are already verified by news agencies or their newsrooms, especially in the context of information war. What we coded as the journalists' "own pictures" (taken by the journalists themselves) constitute about 30 per cent of the image tweets. Some of the latter focused on individual events, such as the shooting down of MH17 or the Minsk peace talks. In these image tweets, the journalists reacted to newsworthy events and images as they occurred. Alternatively, other image tweets were oriented towards interpretation: they were used to express moral indignation, to exercise media criticism and – following the logic of social media – to share humorous memes and record mundane and absurd observations. Regarding the themes covered (Figure 1), there were clear differences among the journalists. Hansen stands out from the two foreign correspondents in that his image tweets focused almost exclusively on the violent consequences of the conflict, especially the MH17 disaster. In comparison, Luhn focused more on everyday life in his image tweets, while Walker's main topics were international politics and everyday life.

Regarding the emotional styles of the reporting (Figure 2), Luhn preferred a neutral stance but also used other emotional styles, particularly a comical one. Walker's image tweets were similarly mostly neutral, but critical and ironic tweets were also prevalent. Hansen did not use humour in his image tweets; his style was predominantly critical or neutral. Obviously, the emotional domains varied according to the topics covered. For instance, while most of the image tweets presenting the

armed conflict in Ukraine were neutral in tone, image tweets dealing with issues or events related to international politics, such as the Minsk peace talks, were typically ironic. Moreover, topics related to everyday life or journalistic work were the most likely to be treated comically.

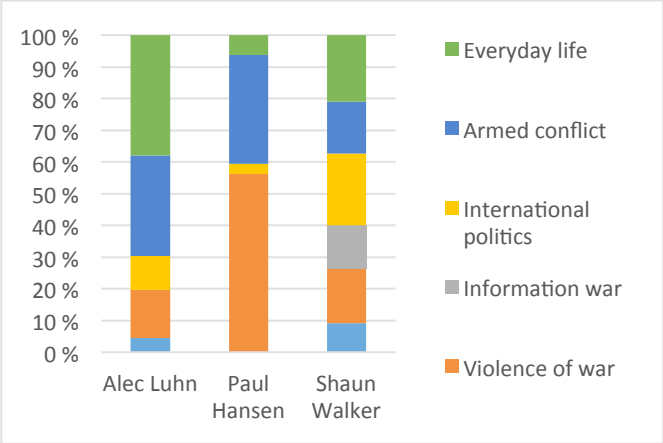

Figure 1. Themes of the image tweets

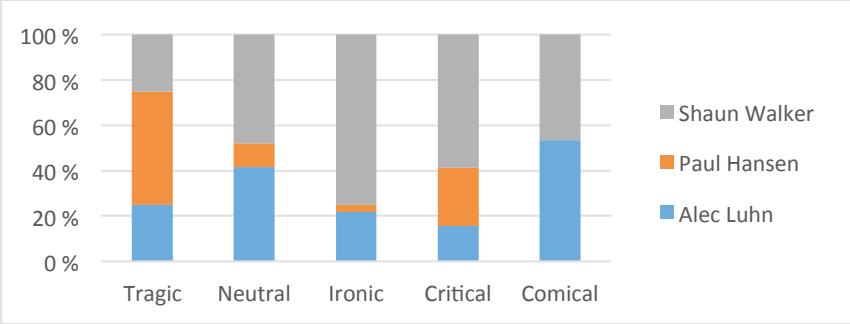

Figure 2. Emotional domains of the image tweets

In the following sections, I will firstly look in more depth at the traditional and personalised uses of images in the breaking news coverage of the shooting down of MH17. Secondly, I will examine how the image tweets contributed to public discussion by producing moral evaluations and presenting opinions about the political and journalistic cultures that created and sustained the conflict. Thirdly, I will discuss how visuals helped to personalise the journalists' reporting by revealing their human side.

Emotional expression in tweeting breaking news

Visualisations of war in news coverage have traditionally focused on human tragedy, but also on military technology, heroism and dramatic action on the battlefield or at humanitarian sites (Chouliaraki 2013). Overall, the fact that the Ukraine conflict has produced the most violent military conflict in Europe since the wars in the former Yugoslavia, as well as a major humanitarian crisis, has not been wholly reflected in its visual coverage by Western print media. The armed conflict and its human consequences have attracted less attention than the political conflict (Ojala

and Pantti 2016). However, the suffering of Ukrainian civilians has received newspaper attention and has been visually represented to generate feelings of sympathy: such images include people fleeing their homes, gazing at the destruction of property or grieving (Ojala, Pantti and Kangas 2017). On Twitter, however, the plight of Ukrainians living through a prolonged conflict was clearly not a focus. In fact, during the two-month period under study, only one image tweet depicted the consequences of the conflict for Ukrainian civilians: a BBC World photograph retweeted by Hansen that showed children and elderly women being evacuated from Donetsk.

As well as lacking portrayals of the humanitarian crisis, the image tweets also differed from traditional war coverage in the absence of images involving death or injury. In text-only tweets, however, casualties were often reported in a "just the facts" style. For instance, on 28 July, Luhn tweeted that "5 civilians were killed in Lugansk and 3 in Donetsk in the past 24 hours". The reticence or self-censorship about showing images of war casualties, and uncertainty over whether and how to publish such photos has been a persistent issue in journalism (Griffin 2010; Zelizer 2005). On Twitter, as Holton and Lewis (2011) argue, journalists participate in constructing journalistic norms of application, including norms about publishing graphic images. By working outside the editorial control of the newsroom, the journalists themselves become visual gatekeepers, and the journalists in this study opted for the sanitised mainstream representation of the Ukrainian conflict. Instead of sharing the shocking or "bloody" visuals available, they referred to "sickening" images "that will churn your stomach" and included links to the images. For example, Walker tweeted on the fighting between pro-Russian rebels and Ukrainian government forces in the city of Horlivka on 27 July – an incident that claimed several civilian lives, including those of children – as follows: "Awful footage of Gorlovka Grad attack (via @HarrietSalem). The photos of the human consequences are too grim to post www.youtube.com/watch?v=wL4In-hSJmY".

The above tweet illustrates the personalised reporting style used on Twitter as it draws on personal experience, feelings and judgments. Here, the journalist's "self" is present both in his reaction to the images and in his decision not to post them. As also seen in the low number of image tweets compared to textual tweets, the inclusion of images continues to be a "troublesome practice" (Zelizer 2005) in the digital culture. The ambivalence between the persistence of the traditional uses of images and the personalised visual practice is examined here through the breaking news coverage of the shooting down of MH17. Regarding the 10 most retweeted and liked image tweets in the sample, five were about the crash.

The first image tweets of MH17 on 17 July authenticated the news of the disaster. Within minutes of one another, all three journalists retweeted similar news images of the crash site from international photo agencies or major news organisations. The journalists' image tweets following the disaster were driven by both the newsworthiness of the event and the real-time nature of Twitter; thus, they retweeted the first reliable images available. Before retweeting the Reuters image of the crash site, Walker, who was located in Kiev at the time of the incident, posted a series of tweets in which he anxiously pondered whether rumours about the shooting down of a passenger plane were true. Luhn, situated in Moscow, retweeted a similar crash site image from the BBC with text highlighting the newsworthiness of the mere existence of images in a breaking news situation: "More pictures emerge of the Malaysia Airlines #MH17 crash site in Ukraine". The function of these first image retweets was to provide evidence that the disaster had occurred and to construct a shared visual understanding of the horror and its magnitude through the "aftermath aesthetic", a highly conventional trope of disaster and war reporting (Chouliaraki 2013; Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen 2007).

Research has found that retweets typically have stronger emotional content than original tweets (Garcia et al. 2014, 404). This was not the case with journalists' tweets in relation to either MH17 or the conflict in general. Clearly, the emotional content and the text/image relationship depend on

the use to which the image is put and on the role the journalist takes. The first images of the crash were accompanied by neutral informative texts which emphasised the journalists' role as information disseminators in a breaking news situation, while the aftermath aesthetic of the pictures depicted what had happened. However, when journalists arrived at the MH17 crash site, the aftermath images were no longer used as evidence of the crash. Instead, they were aestheticised to articulate the emotional testimony and moral responses of the journalists (cf. Tait 2011).

Walker's retweet of the Moscow-based Dutch correspondent Olaf Koens' post two days after the incident is illustrative of how the pictures taken by news organisations were re-appropriated by journalists as "eyewitness" images. Koens' tweet showed a white "I (heart) Amsterdam" T-shirt among the personal belongings of the passengers. The text read, "This probably hurts the most. In between the debris in the field" (19 July 2014). Here, the reporter's disclosure of a personal emotion while in the field perfectly corresponds to the photo of a mundane personal item. Furthermore, the emotional intensity of the tweet is heightened by this picture-text congruence. Similarly, when Walker arrived at the crash site, he posted an image of a piece of the plane on a bright sunflower field and expounded upon its meaning: "What an awful day. RIP everyone that died on MH17 and indeed everyone that has died in this pointless nasty conflict". While the photos came from a news agency in both cases, the role of eyewitness turned them into illustrations of not only what the journalists had seen but also what it felt like to witness such devastation.

Figure 3. Walker bears witness to the victims of the conflict. Source: Shaun Walker, Twitter: @shaunwalker7, https://twitter.com/shaunwalker7/status/490913301459918848/photo/1

Another conventional visual theme of war reporting is pictures of mourning people, which are used to convey empathy and hope as a counterforce against death (Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen 2007). Hansen published a series of his own photographs (Figure 4), which stood out not only because of their aesthetic quality but also because of their unusual focus on Ukrainian civilians. If we

understand the practice of bearing witness as being inevitably about the construction of "us" and "them" (Tait 2011), Hansen's lyrical pictures of elderly peasant women at an Eastern Orthodox memorial service expanded the representation of trauma and worthy victims in legacy media coverage of the MH17 disaster. Unlike the Moscow correspondents, Hansen largely refrained from verbally expressing personal emotions or a moral stance – his photographs of grieving villagers, for instance, had identical informative descriptions – but his photographs articulated a universal moral claim about the devastation wreaked by war while also showing the common humanity of those involved.

Figure 4. Hansen presents civilian grieving as the face of the Ukrainian conflict. Source: Paul Hansen, Twitter: @paulhansen64, https://twitter.com/paulhansen64/status/490734489967284224

Moral discourse in visual narratives

In the context of the information war, the driving force behind the opinionated tweets was the existence of propaganda. The tweets coded as critical or ironic in the sample were characterised by a more or less explicit value judgment that altered the position of the reporter from that of detached information source to that of moral agent. This section focuses on how the image tweets contributed to public discussion by critiquing the political and journalistic cultures that created and sustained the conflict.

An image tweet posted by Walker regarding the public abuse of a Ukrainian woman by pro-Russian passers-by at a Donetsk traffic roundabout – she was wrapped in a Ukrainian flag and labelled a child-killer and spy for the Ukrainian army – exemplifies the explicit moral stance he injected into the image tweets (Figure 5). This example also shows how textual framing can strengthen the moral force of a picture: Walker uses the image to support his point of view, and he guides the reading of his followers not only by identifying the image as "hideous" but also by giving a larger meaning to the event by turning the image into a symbol of the propaganda war. The photograph, thus, worked as empirical evidence based on which the journalist could open a moral discussion. Notably,

Hansen retweeted the same picture but used only the original poster's (Oliver Carroll, chief editor of *the Moscow Times*) informative text about the identity of the victim.

Figure 5. Critical image tweet with a moral claim. Source: Shaun Walker, Twitter: @shaunwalker7, https://twitter.com/shaunwalker7/status/504230859277209601

All of the journalists' image tweets reflected Western distrust of the pronouncements of the Russian authorities and media. However, Walker took on the greatest variety of roles, from information disseminator to adversarial critic to sentimental or witty observer. In comparison to his colleagues, Walker used more emotive vocabulary as well as emotionally loaded interjections, such as "urgh" and "argh", to express his disgust and indignation. For example, in an image tweet showing young women wearing bikinis adorned with Putin's images: "This is supposedly an image from a major youth forum in Crimea. Argh!" The tweet of the Ukrainian woman tied to a pole reflects part of his overarching moral discourse, characterised by framing the conflict as "meaningless", "pointless" or "insane". His verbally and visually constructed discourse on the insanity of the war is linked to his openly adversarial stance towards Russia's involvement in the conflict. The sample revealed a sub-narrative on the information war that depicts the intense propaganda atmosphere and also challenges the integrity of Russia's state-controlled media. The second most retweeted and liked image tweet in the sample, posted a day after the shooting down of MH17, captures this battle to define the "truth" in a conflict in which the versions of events given by the warring parties are mutually exclusive and in which Western media and journalists can position themselves as above the information war (Boyd-Barrett 2015, 2016; Ojala, Pantti and Kangas 2016). The image shows a former correspondent for RT, Sara Firth, smiling and holding a microphone, with the following accompanying text: "I resigned from RT today. I have huge respect for many in the team, but I'm for the truth".

In journalism, irony is a traditional device for conveying a subjective voice and critical evaluations. The use of irony to convey a negative opinion while maintaining "the professional façade of objectivity" has long been a topic in journalism research (e.g. Glasser and Ettema 1993). In war and disaster reporting, however, there has traditionally been little room for irony. On Twitter, journalists appear to be more prone to adopt an ironic disposition (Holton and Lewis 2011; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012). However, on Twitter, irony appears to be less about producing covert negative connotations than about being a thriving communicative mode on the platform. Such an ironic disposition was especially prominent in visual representations related to Russia. The abstract concept of the "information war" was visualized by pictures of pages of Russian newspapers, screenshots of television news and images of wall graffiti, posters and paraphernalia. An image tweet showing a picture of the front page of the Russian pro-government newspaper, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, is illustrative of the ironic tweets pointing to the Russian media's questionable performance (Figure 6). In this image tweet, which followed the shooting down of MH17, the invoking of moral contempt emerges from the congruence of the verbal and the visual. Verbal irony is often defined as saying the opposite of what is meant in order to produce an evaluative expression, and Walker's dismissive comment "something about a plane", highlighting the positioning and size of the news story on the MH17 disaster on the paper's front page, effectively states that the Russian media was deliberately ignoring the story.

Figure 6. Image tweet criticising Russian media. Source: Shaun Walker, Twitter: @shaunwalker7, https://twitter.com/shaunwalker7/status/490031664639537153

If the critical and ironic image tweets conveyed the moral deficit surrounding the Ukrainian conflict and the revulsion felt by the journalists, humorous image tweets adapted the logic of social media to keep followers amused. The journalists' humorous tweets expressed fewer explicit moral claims, but nevertheless worked to encourage a critical reading of the politicians and politics surrounding the conflict. The Russian convoy of over 200 trucks, which the Kremlin claimed was carrying only humanitarian goods, was another major news event that was closely followed by journalists. While most tweets about the aid convoy featured dull news images of Russian trucks, Luhn and Walker also employed user-generated visuals for illustrations. The aid convoy sparked a wave of creative visuals on social media that speculated about the cargo. Suspicions about the convoy increased when Western journalists were allowed to inspect some of the trucks and found them almost empty. Luhn reacted to the discovery with a tweet saying: "So Russia's aid convoy is half empty. Maybe this is not so much about taking in aid as taking out rebels & arms?". He uploaded a photoshopped picture (Figure 7) which suggested that the former Ukrainian leader, Viktor Yanukovych, who escaped with Putin's help, was part of the mysterious cargo (15 August 2016). Similarly, Walker uploaded a cartoon (12 August 2014) that depicted the convoy as a Trojan horse for the Russian military, a widely used visual trope about the convoy on social media. At the end of the text ("A German cartoonist's take on Russia's humanitarian convoy…"), he used an ellipsis as a visual cue to create a bond between him and those followers who would understand the joke. Such vernacular images emphasised the personal perspectives of the journalists in a powerful manner: they were visual embellishments designed to provoke and which worked to amplify the discourse of "ridiculous (Russian) politics" and "fake news".

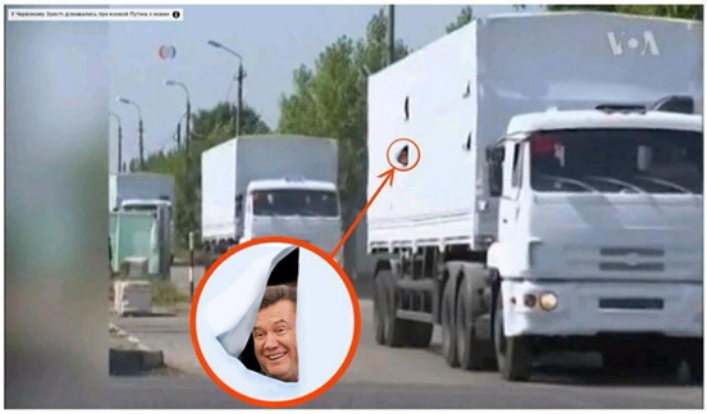

Figure 7. A photoshopped reaction to the Russian aid convoy. Source: Alec Luhn, Twitter: @ASLuhn, https://twitter.com/ASLuhn/status/499579785828253700

In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, humour, politics and Twitter have a symbiotic relationship. In order to convey humour, the image tweets on political affairs in this study's sample employed both comical photoshopped images and playful textual additions to embedded news photos. For instance, Luhn posted an altered image of the official group photo of the Minsk negotiations, with the political leaders photoshopped to appear as superheroes. Similarly, referring to Russian soldiers who were found on Ukrainian territory and explained away by the Russian authorities as having crossed the border accidentally, Walker imagined EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton saying to others at the Minsk negotiations, "We seem to be on the wrong floor. I think we must have ascended this staircase by accident" (Figure 8). Clearly, the journalists' playful remediations on the political dimension of the Ukraine conflict contributed to the dominant Western political and

media discourse, which sees the Ukraine conflict as a problem caused by Russian destructive actions (cf. Boyd-Barrett 2015; Ojala and Pantti 2016).

Figure 8. Blending humour and politics in image tweets. Source: Shaun Walker, Twitter: @shaunwalker7, https://twitter.com/shaunwalker7/status/504241949591605248

Personal transparency amidst war reporting

Image tweets also focus on topics that are personal in nature. Research has shown that journalists, in revealing personal information about themselves, have adapted their behaviour to suit the culture of social media (Holton and Lewis 2011; Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2011; Molyneux 2014). While such "personal transparency", through which journalists become celebrities, is promoted by social media logic (Hedman 2016), some journalists choose not to share personal information or opinions (e.g. Canter 2014; Rogstad 2016).

Visuals can contribute to personalised conflict reporting by presenting the human face of journalists or, alternatively, by taking readers behind the scenes of the journalists' work as conflict reporters. Such tweeting is not about offering insights into the news production process (Lasorsa 2012) but about revealing the special circumstances of working in the media environment of an information war. For Walker, the visual narrative of the information war included his personal experience as a victim of the hostile, polarised political climate. His tweets on this subject can be understood as part of his self-branding or his venting anger and frustration after being a target of constant abuse. In an image tweet featuring a screenshot of an e-mail addressed to Walker and the editors of the *Guardian* questioning his "uncanny" access to Russian special operations (14 August 2014), Walker wrote, "It is true, the level of access I have to the FSB and GRU [Russian security services] is quite remarkable".

Research has noted that humour, witty observations and peculiar happenings are key ingredients that can help tweets resonate with a wide audience (Highfield 2015; Holton and Lewis 2011; Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012). Moreover, the use of humour is particularly connected to sharing personal viewpoints and experiences. The journalists in this study presented images of the everyday life of conflict reporting that, in a humorous way, deconstructed the identity of the heroic war correspondent working under dangerous conditions; Luhn tweeted a picture of a woman milking a cow in a luminous and serene wooded area, with the ironic caption, "War reporting, Eastern Ukraine". The image tweets also revealed that the reporters were part of an exclusive ring of professional foreign correspondents and photographers who retweeted and linked to each other. Research has stressed that friendship among groups of correspondents who cover the same "bad news" is an important factor in coping with potentially difficult experiences (Thussu and Freedman 2003). Luhn's post mentioning Vice News (Vice reporters were kidnapped in Ukraine) and Roland Oliphant, Moscow correspondent for *the Telegraph*, is illustrative of these behind-the-scenes friendships, but also of the humorous reflection on and reconstruction of the identity of a war correspondent (Figure 9).

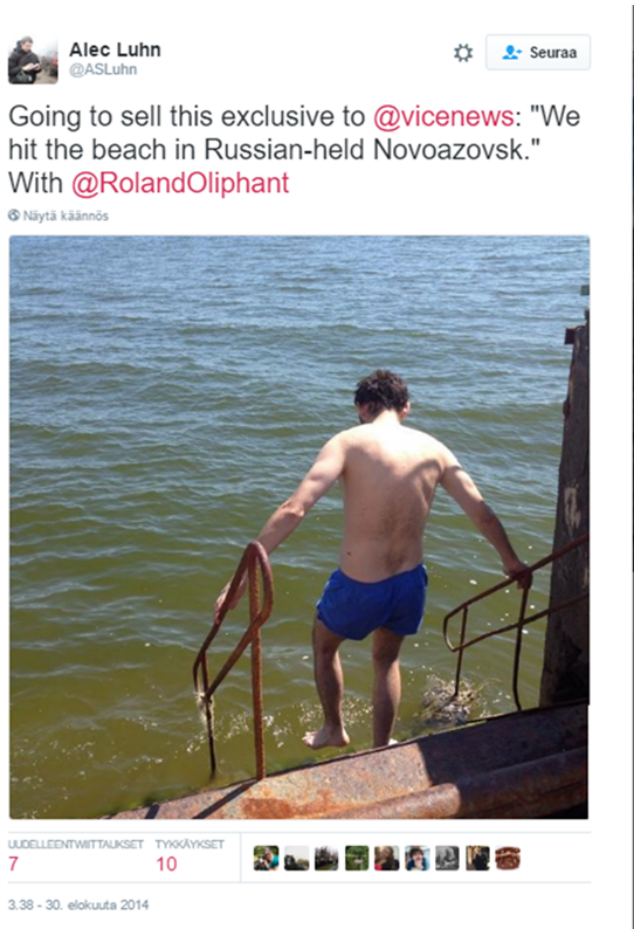

Figure 9. Bonding on- and off-line while reporting on separatists and the Russian military entering the border town of Novoazovsk. Source: Alec Luhn, Twitter: @ASLuhn, https://twitter.com/ASLuhn/status/505665884883800064

Hence, the journalists used humour and their own snapshot photos with a vernacular aesthetic to document the conflict from their own perspective; such behaviour is linked to the idea of personal

tweets by journalists as a method of self-branding and gaining attention (Hedman 2016; Mourão 2015). Nevertheless, social media encourages the recording of delightful and funny encounters, bringing new aspects to journalists' professional reporting role and the visual coverage of conflict. The journalists often tweeted about banal details of everyday life in Ukraine and Russia, such as a snapshot of a menu in Kiev with a dish called "Crimea is ours" (23 August 2014), named after Russia's annexation of Crimea and an internet meme. On the other hand, the image tweets also provided insights into key places in the conflict as experienced by reporters. For instance, Walker posted photos of Donetsk at a time when Ukrainian forces were fighting with rebels in the area (Figure 10).

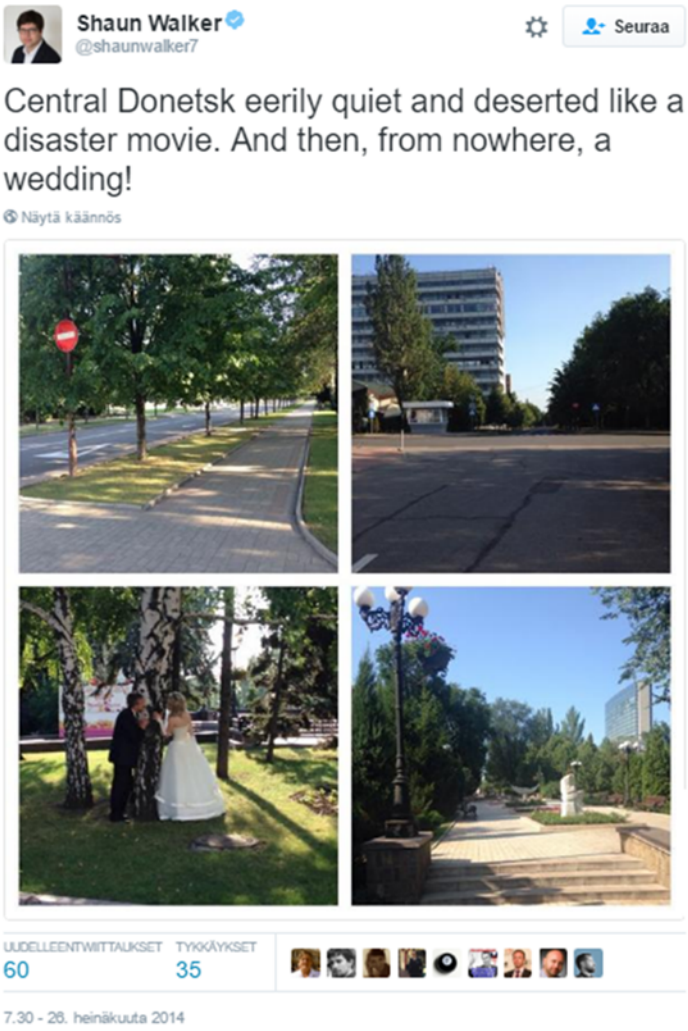

Figure 10. Personal photos from Donetsk. Source: Shaun Walker, Twitter: @shaunwalker7, https://twitter.com/shaunwalker7/status/493040655548305408

Conclusion

This study was driven by the question of how visual imagery published and shared by Western journalists on Twitter is used to give meaning to a controversial international conflict. Image tweets are gaining in popularity, but they still comprise only a fraction of the tweets posted by the journalists in this study. While these image tweets followed conventional visual narratives and the news values of conflict reporting in legacy media, they also fluctuated between fact-based neutral reporting and the sharing of opinions and personal stories.

If we consider the image tweets as a narrative on the Ukraine conflict, we can identify three levels to this narrative. First, the image tweets adhered to the traditional practices and visual conventions of crisis reporting in which journalists retain their public roles as the breakers and interpreters of news. The journalists selected images because they were newsworthy in themselves or because they illustrated topical content or featured strong emotion and, thus, enhanced the emotional appeal of the post. Photographer Hansen, who published his own eyewitness photos in the aftermath of the downing of MH17, never departed from this strictly professional role. The Moscow correspondents, Luhn and Walker, used news agency photos or retweeted the tweets of traditional media organisations and other journalists.

At the second level, the image-based tweets entered a more subjective realm when the journalists expressed moral claims, personal emotions and opinions in ways that have been acceptable in legacy media only when separated from news reports. Here, the journalists became conflict protagonists in the information war, using a wider variety of visual images to prove their points. This dimension could potentially contribute to critical public discussion and allow journalists to engage with questions of right and wrong (Glasser and Ettema 1993). However, the moral discourse of the image tweets was often limited to rhetoric condemning or ridiculing the Russian authorities or media, and affirming the Western perspective on the Ukraine conflict. While the journalists made some efforts in their tweets to visualise the human cost of the war, it is clear that they did not use the emotional power of the image tweets to create a humanitarian narrative of the civilian suffering (that was not related to MH17). At the third level, the image tweets adjusted to the culture of social media by focusing on the journalists themselves, insomuch as the use of visual images reflected the experiences of the journalists reporting on the conflict rather than news topics.

In conflict reporting, there is nothing new in the tension between journalists as neutral observers and as moral agents, or simply human beings working in negative environments. What is new is the fluid blending of these roles and the engagement of the journalists with the story as it becomes part of the Twitter narrative. Twitter allows journalists to personalise their visual narratives in their own ways: there is no stable visual narrative emerging from the image tweets, but story-telling across multiple voices and modes – sometimes neutral, sometimes bitingly ironic or deeply emotional – even within one Twitter feed.

Due to the small number of tweeter studies, it is difficult to draw generalisable conclusions about the use of image tweets. However, the information war raging on Twitter clearly had an impact on the emotional and moral discourses of the image tweets. This was especially evident in the tweets by the foreign correspondents, who have an insider's perspective on the conflict, compared to the war photographer 'parachuted' into Ukraine to cover the MH17 story. In particular, the cost of the openness of Twitter was evident in Walker's feed, who was a constant target of online abuse, partly because of his elite position as a correspondent for *the Guardian* and partly because of his adversarial and personal reporting on Twitter. Moreover, while the use of irony and humour is connected to the affordances of the social media platform, the ironic mode is also connected to this particular conflict. While it was not within the scope of this study to compare the ways in which image tweets are used when reporting on other conflicts, it became evident that humorous or ironic tweets were not similarly part of covering the Israel-Palestine conflict that was escalating during the period under study. The image tweets of the Ukraine conflict undermined the traditional journalistic narrative of war as a tragedy and ushered in ironic, moral and humorous ways of looking at the conflict that can be understood as a way to discredit certain parties to the conflict as absurd, and to build rapport with like-minded liberal Westerners.

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